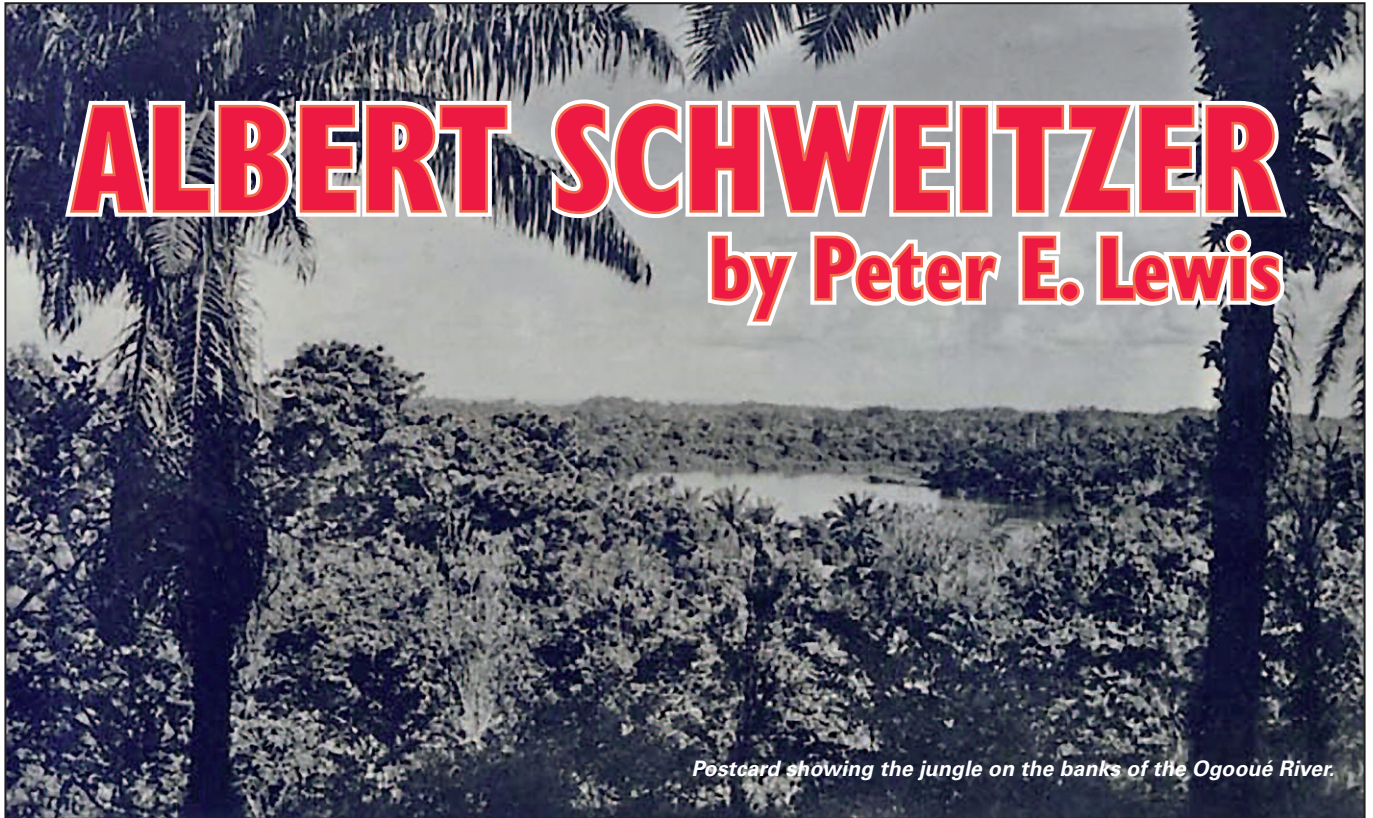


# ALBERT SCHWEITZER

by Peter E. Lewis



Postcard showing the jungle on the banks of the Ogooué River.

JUST before Christmas 2017 a friend gave me a special gift. It was a letter hand-written by Albert Schweitzer. He wrote it in 1964 to an organization in Hamburg to thank them for making him an honorary member. (Figure 1) When I looked at the words on the page and

realized that they had been written by the great man himself I was overcome emotionally. He had been a hero-figure and role model for me when I was a young man, and to have this letter meant a lot to me. Many coins, medals and stamps have been issued in his honour but sadly,

with the passage of time, his example has faded from the public memory. Hopefully this article will revive interest in the man who was philosopher, theologian, Lutheran pastor, medical missionary, musician, musical scholar, peace activist and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

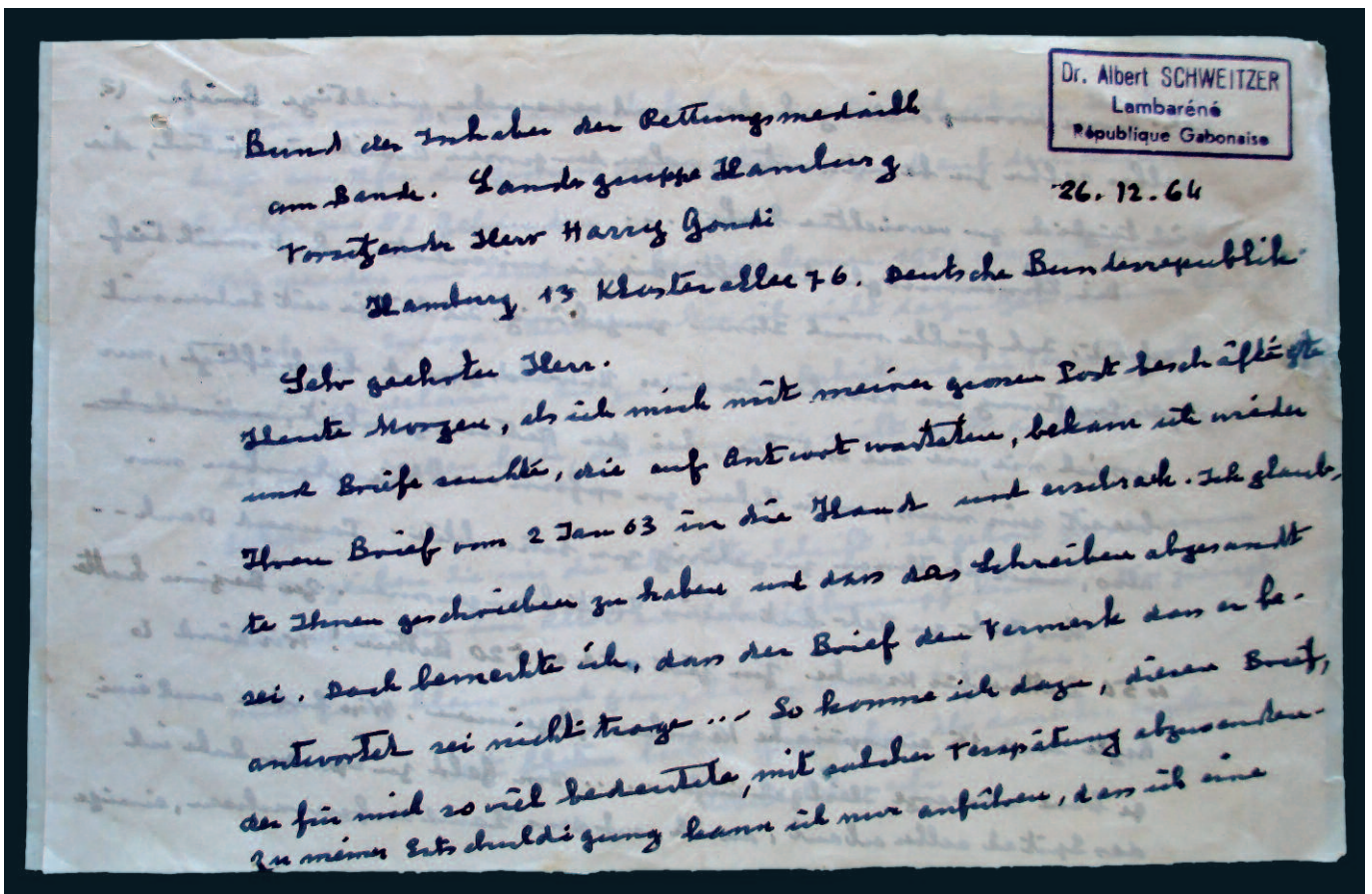


Figure 1 – First page of a letter written by Albert Schweitzer. The paper is thin and he wrote on both sides.

The first Nobel Peace Prize was awarded in 1901 to Henry Dunant, a most worthy recipient. (Figure 2) One of the great men of world history, he was the founder of the Red Cross. (See the article, "Henry Dunant, Founder of the Red Cross" in CAB, April, 2013.) In 1905 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Bertha von Suttner who devoted her life to the prevention of war. (Figure 3) Although she could not prevent the Great War which began in 1914 she tried her utmost. She should be an example for women all over the world, but sadly like Henry Dunant she is not remembered today. (See the article, "Bertha von Suttner" in CAB, June 2014.)

Schweitzer received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. The medal that he was given shows three naked men with interlocked arms, and the surrounding Latin inscription is PRO PACE ET FRATERNITATE GENTUM, which means "For peace and the brotherhood of nations." (Figure 4) On the other side of the medal there is the head of Alfred Nobel. The relevant year and the name of the recipient are engraved on the rim.

Schweitzer was born in 1875 at Kayersberg in Alsace, which today is in France but was in Germany from 1871 to 1919. He was the son of a Lutheran pastor and when he was born his father had already agreed to be the pastor at Günsbach, a village 25 kilometres to the south, and after some months the family moved there. (Figure 5) Schweitzer spoke the Alsatian dialect of German but was fluent in French. He embarked on an academic career studying philosophy and theology, and in 1899 he gained the degree of doctor of philosophy from the University of Strasburg in Alsace. In 1903 he was appointed Principal of the Theological College of St Thomas, which was attached to the university. In 1906 he published a book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which was a major contribution to studies about the historical Jesus. He believed that Jesus expected the immanent end of the world and that

this influenced his teaching and actions. Although modern theologians do not emphasize this aspect of Jesus' life as much as Schweitzer did, his book is still of scholarly interest. Schweitzer was also a gifted musician and particularly liked to play the music of Johann Sebastian Bach on the organ. From the age of nine he could play the organ in the village church.

In 1905 Schweitzer announced his intention to become a medical missionary in Africa. In 1913 he graduated as a doctor of medicine, and with his wife, Helene, who had trained as a nurse, he embarked on this adventure. He was sent by the Paris Missionary Society to their

mission station at Lambaréné, which was on the bank of the Ogooué River in the Gabon Province of French Equatorial Africa. (Figure 6) There was no hospital there but with the help of the natives he built one. The money to maintain the hospital came as gifts from individuals and various organizations. At this remote place in the jungle Schweitzer dealt with a great variety of medical problems. He even performed surgical operations, a common one being for strangulated hernia. The river was like a highway and patients were often brought to the hospital by boat. On a brown porcelain medallion made at the Meissen factory in Germany there is a picture of the hos-



Figure 3 – Ten-euro coin issued by Germany in 2005 to honour Baroness Bertha von Suttner. "Die Waffen Nieder!" means "Put down the weapons!" Even when she was dying in 1914 just before the outbreak of the war she kept repeating these words.



Figure 2 – Medal showing Henry Dunant. It is 50 mms in diameter and was made in Spain in about 1980.



Figure 4 – Reverse of the Nobel Peace Prize Medal. It is different from the medals given with the other Nobel prizes. (Source: Wikipedia)



Figure 5 – Map of Alsace. Strassburg or Strasburg is the German name of the city called Strasbourg in French. Colmar is an ancient city where Schweitzer spent holidays. He attended a boarding school at Mulhouse.

pital as seen from the river. (Figure 7) A photograph of the hospital taken in 1924 shows that it was very different from a modern hospital building. (Figure 8) A postcard on which Schweitzer has written shows the place where the canoes brought the patients. (Figure 9)

Despite all the difficulties that Schweitzer faced, the hospital served the needs of the people and he felt that he was doing what he should be doing. On a silver medal made in Germany we see him



Figure 6 – Map of Gabon. Gabon became an independent nation in 1960. Previously it had been a colony of France. The red dot shows the position of Lambaréné. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

treating a sick native whose head is being lifted so that he can see the doctor using his stethoscope. (Figure 10) In his autobiography, *My Life and Thought*, which was published in 1933, he wrote: *I wanted*

*to be a doctor that I might be able to work without having to talk. For years I had been giving myself out in words, and it was with joy that I had followed the calling of theological teacher and*



Figure 7 – Porcelain medallion showing the hospital at Lambaréné. It is 63 mms in diameter and bears the crossed-swords symbol of the Meissen factory.

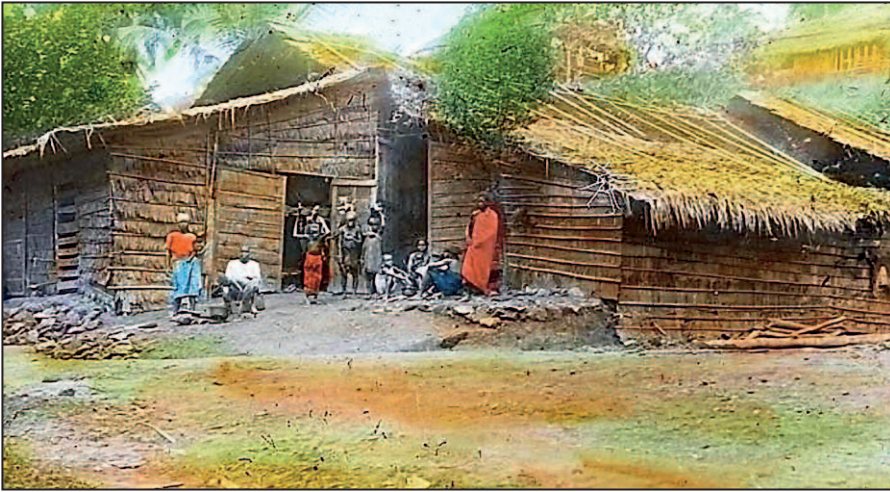


Figure 8 – Photograph of the hospital at Lambaréné with colour added. (Source: Wikimedia Commons. Attribution: Tropenmuseum, part of the National Museum of World Cultures, Netherlands)

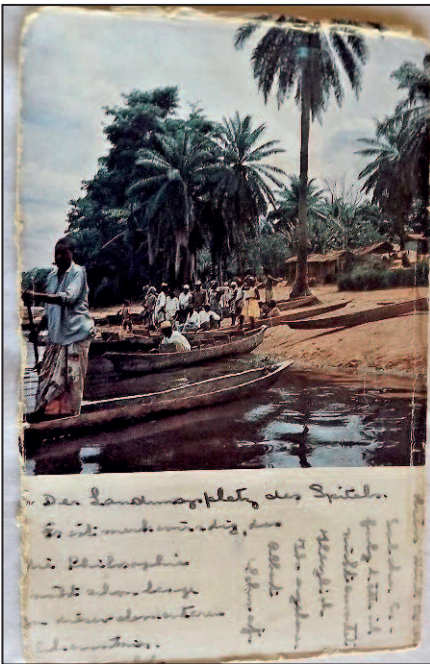


Figure 9 – Postcard showing the landing place at the hospital. Schweitzer wrote on it and signed it.

preacher. But this new form of activity I could not represent to myself as talking about the religion of love, but only as an actual putting of it into practice.

Schweitzer's explanation, that his work was the actual putting into practice of love, applies to everyone in the health professions: doctors, nurses, paramedics, etc. To be doing something practical for someone who is suffering is the ultimate form of service. It is love in action. Schweitzer's words are an inspiration for every health worker, and his example of overcoming every difficulty is a powerful encouragement.

Schweitzer earned money for his hospital by giving organ recitals in Europe and by writing books. *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest* was one of his early books. In World War I he was interned in France because of his German background and it was at that time that he began to think about the future of civi-

lization. The result was the book, *Philosophy of Civilization*, which was published in 1923. In it he put forward the ethical principle of "reverence for life." In German the phrase is "Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben" and it often appears on the German coins and medals with his image.

In his biography, *The Three Worlds of Albert Schweitzer*, Robert Payne explains Schweitzer's idea of reverence for life: "Ehrfurcht" means more than "reverence". It has overtones of awe and shuddering wonder and great blessedness. Before God a man may abase himself in holy awe. A man may humble himself before



Figure 10 – Medal showing Schweitzer examining a very sick native probably brought to the hospital by canoe. An attendant comforts the patient and lifts his head to see the doctor using a stethoscope.

the infinite spaces of the firmament. So should a man humble himself before the ever-present miracle of life. Let him regard that miracle with reverential fear and wonder, and let him never cease regarding it in this way, for all life is the vehicle of the power of God.

Schweitzer continued working at Lambaréné even in his eighties, and he has been criticized because his hospital was not like a modern hospital and because he had a paternalistic attitude to the natives. In *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* his contribution is summed up as follows: *Despite the occasional criticisms of Schweitzer's medical practice as being autocratic and primitive, and despite the opposition sometimes raised against his theological works, his influence continues to have a strong moral appeal, frequently serving as a source of encouragement for other medical missionaries.*

He died at Lambaréné in 1965 and was buried there. Since then his moral example has been recognized all over the world and several countries have issued coins in his honour. West Germany issued a 5-mark coin in 1975 to celebrate the centenary of his birth (Figure 11) and to go one better, East Germany issued a 10-mark coin in the same year. (Figure 12) There have even been gold coins with his image on the reverse, and a gold coin from Benin shows him holding a pen and about to write. (Figure 13)



Figure 11 – 5-mark coin issued by West Germany in 1975.



Figure 12 – 10-mark coin issued by East Germany in 1975.



Figure 13 – Gold coin issued by Benin in 2005. Benin is a country in West Africa. It was formerly called Dahomey.

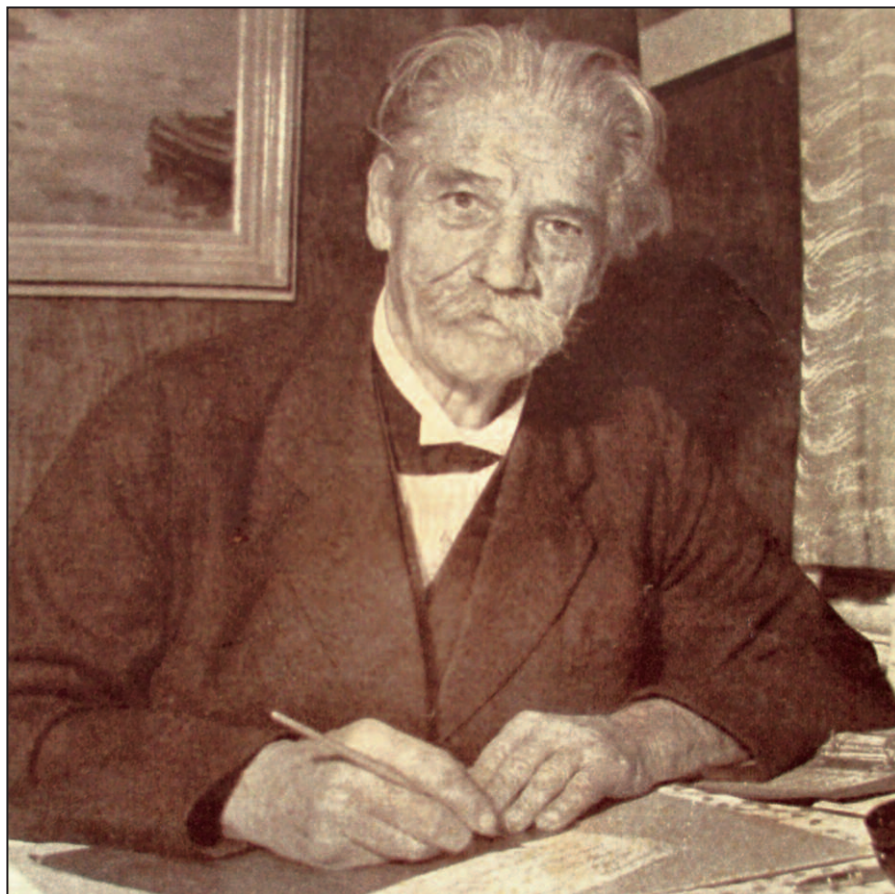


Figure 14 – Photo of Albert Schweitzer. The caption, "Ein Brief des Neunzigjährigen," means "A letter from the ninety-year old." He is writing the letter which is now in the author's possession.

When he received the Nobel Peace Prize he used the money to build a home for leprosy patients at Lambaréné and he joined Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell and others to plead for the abolition of nuclear weapons. All his life he was life-affirming and world-affirming, and in his biography, *Albert Schweitzer: The Man and his Mind*, written in 1948 George Seaver described his vocation: *To succour mankind, to bring the light of the knowledge of the glory of God to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide their feet into the way of peace, – that is his vocation. But to take shape, to prove effective, solid, substantial, this evangel must come not from his lips only, but from his hands; not in word only, but in deed. To be a missionary, yes, that is something; but to be a medical missionary, that is more. To preach the word, that is something; but simultaneously to heal the sick, that is more.*

Schweitzer's hand-written letter was a welcome addition to my collection of coins, medals and stamps issued in his honour. Also I have books about him and by him, as well as postcards on which he has written. He provided a wonderful example of a life that has been beneficial to the whole world, and young people especially should know about him. If any colleges in south-east Queensland or northern New South Wales were interested in having an exhibition to commemorate Albert Schweitzer I would be happy to take my collection to them. Hopefully some of the students would be inspired to do great things in their lives.

*Note: Unless otherwise stated the items shown are from the author's collection.*

☆☆☆

## Numismatic Books & Catalogues

100's of  
Australian and World  
Numismatic books  
and catalogues  
available on all subjects

**M.E.F. BOOKS**

PO Box 523

NARRABEEN NSW 2101

Phone (02) 9913 3036